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# A Lesson Before Dying [12th grade]

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*Trinity University*

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# UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN

## Unit Cover Page

**Unit Title:** *A Lesson Before Dying*

**Grade Level:** 12<sup>th</sup> grade

**Subject/Topic Area(s):** English

**Designed By:** Devon Erlich

**Time Frame:** Six weeks (Thirty 50-minute class periods)

**School District:** NISD

**School:** John Marshall High School

**School Address and Phone:** 8000 Lobo Lane, San Antonio, Texas, 78240.  
(210) 397-7100

### **OVERVIEW & STATUS**

#### **Brief Summary of Unit:**

Students will focus on the novel *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines which outlines the emotional and intellectual journey of a wrongfully convicted black man and his teacher before the convicted's execution in a Cajun community in the 1940's. The themes presented in the book will raise questions for the students such as What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be educated? And Is justice always just? They will explore the idea that many issues surrounding justice, racism, and human responsibility are just as prevalent today as for the characters presented in the novel.

Not only will students investigate major themes in the novel, but they will also focus on literary elements. The class will question the author's motivation for writing the novel and for choosing certain characters and settings; they will discuss how author's stylistic choices help develop the theme or conflict in a story.

The unit will culminate in a cooperative learning project that asks the students an essential question raised by the novel, do we control our future or do forces outside of our control determine our destiny?

**Unit: *A Lesson Before Dying***

**Grade: 12**

**Stage 1: Desired Results**

**Understandings**

*Students will understand that...*

Individual actions are motivated by both internal and external forces  
There is a difference between obligation and commitment  
Individual development requires dedicated effort  
Conceptions of justice may vary  
Authors have specific purposes for including different elements in their writing

**Essential Questions**

What does it mean to be human?  
Do we control the direction of our lives, or do forces outside of our control determine our destiny?  
What does it mean to be educated?  
Obligation versus commitment: To whom do we owe things, and why?  
How does an author's choice of setting, characters, point of view, and other elements contribute to theme and conflict?  
Is justice always just?

**Knowledge and Skills**

*Students will be able to...*

1C. Write in a voice and style appropriate to audience and purpose  
5D. Explain how writers represent and reveal their cultures in texts  
8B. Draw upon their own background to connect to texts  
8G. Draw inferences and support them with textual evidence and experience  
9B. Read in varied sources  
9D. Identify possible influences of the historical context of a literary work  
10C. Recognize and discuss themes that cross cultures  
12A. Compare elements of texts such as themes, conflicts, and allusions both within and across texts  
12C. Analyze relevance of setting and time frame to text's meaning  
12F. Connect literature to historical contexts, current events, and his/her own experiences  
13E. Describe how a writer's motivation, stance, or position may affect text structure and tone  
14C. Use text organizers to locate and categorize information  
16A. Use conventions of oral language effectively  
16C. Respond appropriately to the opinions and views of others  
16F. Make relevant contributions in conversations and discussions  
16G. Express and defend a point of view using precise language and appropriate detail  
17B. Support major thesis with logical points or arguments  
21C. Use a range of techniques to plan and create a media text and reflect critically on the work produced

## Stage 2: Assessment Evidence

**Performance Task:** Each one of you will be placed in a group of four. Each group will be assigned a certain position on the following question: **Do we control the direction of our lives, or do forces outside of our control determine our destiny?** You will either be arguing that it is free will- personal decisions and actions, or fate- forces outside of our control, that determine the outcome of our lives. In your groups, you must come up with at least four examples that support you claim.

The four examples must come from the following:

- *A Lesson Before Dying*
- One non-fiction source (magazine, newspaper, online article, book, etc.)
- A previous work that we have read (*Hamlet*, *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, etc.)
- A real life example (personal, a family member, friend, etc.)

Your group will have to present to the entire class, and each person must speak. The speeches should be thorough and well-rehearsed; you may bring note cards. Your presentations will not be timed, but I imagine they will be between five and ten minutes.

Along with your speeches, your group must have a visual to present with. Remember, your goal is to persuade your audience that your opinion on fate or free-will is the right one. You can accompany your speeches in a variety of ways, such as

- A PowerPoint
- A scrapbook
- A poster
- A slideshow
- A website or MySpace pages for characters/people
- You may choose another medium, but please speak to me first

The purpose of each visual is to highlight the important points that go along with each example you discuss. Your visual cannot focus on solely one example but needs to incorporate all four. Remember that artwork/visuals can be literal or symbolic. You should use your visual to engage your audience as you speak; do not simply point at pictures at the end of your presentation.

When we are finished with presentations, you will have another major grade assignment. You will be asked to write a persuasive paper defending your own individual belief on this topic. Not only will you have to choose one side and defend your thoughts with examples, but you will also need to write about the implications for individuals and the world that your decision raises. You will be graded on the Northside writing rubric.

\*\*\**The Performance Task handout and rubric is attached at the end of this document.*

## Other evidence:

*Exit slips, Journals, Charts, Venn diagrams, Quizzes, Analyzing song lyrics, Setting/Snow globe activity, "On the Fence" debates, Four Corners, Web quests, Storyboards, Theme statement and poster designing, timed writing, comprehension and discussion questions*

## Stage 3: Learning Activities

*(Steps taken to get students to answer Stage 1 questions and complete performance task)*

**Day 1- Think-Pair-Share:** Ask each student to write the answer to the following question: What separates humans from animals? After a couple of minutes, the students will meet with a partner and write a combined definition on the white board. On the second white board in our room, I will have written the question, "**What does it mean to be human?**" As a class, we will compile a list of answers based off of the first question. We will then read the first (very short) chapter of *A Lesson Before Dying*. The students will answer this question on an **exit slip**: "Based on our definition of what it means to be human, how is Jefferson dehumanized?" \*Note- each class definition of what it means to be human will be posted throughout the room and referred to for the remainder of the unit.

**Day 2- Obligation versus commitment: To whom are we obligated, and why?** Have the desks arranged in groups of four with the mini-white boards on each cluster. Write multiple sentences, each containing the words obligated or obligation, on a sheet of paper that the students will each receive as they walk in. Examples: "She did not want to babysit, but it was her obligation to help her overwhelmed mother." "The boy wanted to ask for the weekend off, but he felt obligated to work because his manager had given him the past two weekends off." Ask them to cross off the word "obligated" in each sentence and replace it with other words or phrases. Although they can collaborate, each person needs to write answers on their own paper. On the white board, the students need to answer the following question: "What does it mean to be obligated to someone or something?" We will then read chapter two and three. On the back of each handout will be a **venn diagram**. On side will be titled "Grant Wiggins" and one will be titled "Henry Pichot." As we read, they will write characteristics of each person. In the middle (where the circles meet), the students will answer the following question: "How and why are Grant and Henry both obligated to Miss Emma?"

**Day 3- How does an author's choice of elements contribute to theme and conflict?** The students will sketch the home that they were brought up in. If you have moved, they can choose their favorite place or the place where they lived the longest. In their journals, the students will do the following: "Describe the place where you were brought up. Include not only your home, but your surrounding community. How did the setting of your childhood shape you as a person? We will then read chapter four of *A Lesson Before Dying*. The students will receive revised KWL charts; this chart will be a "**K-L-E**" **Chart**, which will stand for what they know about the setting, what they learned about the setting, and what the effects of this knowledge are. Today, they will fill in what they know about the setting about the novel.

**Day 4- How does an author's choice of elements contribute to theme and conflict?** The students will continue working on their **K-L-E Chart**. They will read articles about the south during the 1930s and 1940s and fill in the middle section of the chart to show what they learned. In the final column, they will fill in the effects of the setting on the novel and characters so far. On the board, I will have butcher paper for the students to fill in the effects of the setting on the novel. We will discuss the author's motivation for choosing this location before moving on. Then, we will read Chapter 5.

**Day 5- How does an author's choice of elements contribute to theme and conflict?** The students will receive lyrics to Alabama's "Song of the South." On a column next to the lyrics, the students will have to answer the question, "What does this song tell us about the South during the Great Depression?" After listening to the song and discussing student responses, I will guide them through specific elements that were mentioned such as Roosevelt, the TVA, and wall street. As we read chapter 6, the students will list quotes from the book that convey to the reader that Grant Wiggins is struggling with the racism that he is facing the South. **They will turn in their notes on the song lyrics and the quotes from the novel.**

**Day 6- Read chapters 7 and 8 together.** The students will take an open book **quiz called The Word Game** where they are given words and phrases and have to explain how each one relates to their reading. Examples of words that will be used from this chapter are: superintendent, hands and teeth, wood, mulatto teacher, and superior.

**Day 7- How does an author's choice of elements contribute to theme and conflict?** We will begin by reading chapter

9, the chapter where we finally meet Jefferson in jail. When we get to page 71, I will have all of the students and stand in a six by ten area marked off on the floor, which is the same size as Jefferson's jail cell. As they are standing, I will read the description of the cell. We will discuss in what ways his environment is dehumanizing. We will finish the chapter and then do the **snow globe activity**; this is where the students must capture the essence of the setting presented in the chapter in a five-inch space (a snow globe). After illustrating the setting, they will **answer and explain their responses to the following questions**: Is Jefferson being treated more like a human or an animal? How do you believe Jefferson views himself? How do you believe that Grant views Jefferson?

**Day 8- Obligation versus commitment: To whom are we obligated, and why? Journal-** What does it mean to be committed to something or someone? Name one person/thing that you are committed to, and explain how and why you are committed. Read chapter 10. At the bottom of their journal entry, the students will continue with the question, "At this point in the novel, does Grant feel obligated to help Jefferson or committed to helping Jefferson? Explain." We will then read chapter 11. Next, we will play "**On the fence**." There will be a line drawn in the middle of the room and students who felt the correct answer was "obligated" will fall to one side, and students who felt the answer was "committed" will fall to another. Those who are undecided will stay in the middle. Each side of the imaginary fence will have to make a decision to convince those in the middle (or me) that their side is correct. At the end, the people who were on the fence will have to choose the most convincing argument.

**Day 9- Do we control the direction of our lives or do forces outside of our control determine our destiny?** Briefly summarize chapter 12, and read 13 and 14. Discuss Grant's inability to act. Why does he hate his town so much but refuse to leave? We will then read Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," and the students will do a hexagonal activity which should lead them to think about making difficult choices. **Hexagonal writing** is where the students fold a sheet of paper into six squares; in each square, they should look at the different elements of the text. The tasks are:

- *Describe it- Give a plot summary of the poem*
- *Associate it- Tell how it reminds them of a personal experience*
- *Apply it- Name one theme that is presented in the poem (What is the author saying about \_\_\_\_?)*
- *Analyze it- How is one literary device used in this poem to convey meaning?*
- *Compare it- How does it relate to A Lesson Before Dying?*
- *Judge it- What is your opinion of this poem?*

**Day 10- Is justice always just? Journal-** Why do you believe that sometimes innocent people are found to be guilty in court? Should we continue to punish criminals, even though it is rare to be 100% positive that they committed a crime? What is your opinion of the death penalty? Read chapters 15 and 16. I will hand out and explain the **webquest** to the students that they will be starting the next day covering the Innocence Project of Texas: <http://ipoftexas.org/>.

**Day 11- Is justice always just?** We will go to the computer lab and the students will answer questions in a **webquest** such as "Which state has more wrongful convictions than any other in the nation?" They will have to summarize and react to at least two cases that are presented. Not only will the students search for answers, but they will have empathy questions where they will have to put themselves in the shoes of certain people introduced on the website and describe how they might feel.

**Day 12- How does an author's choice of elements contribute to theme and conflict?** As we read chapter 17, the students will have **sticky notes with symbols for the following: characterization, dialect, V.I.P. (very important point), and imagery**. As we read, they will place the sticky notes inside their books at points where they see examples of the mentioned elements; they will jot notes down on each sticky that relate to the sentence. When we finish the chapter, they will meet in pairs. Each pair will then **fill out a chart** where they have to answer questions such as "Why does the author use a certain dialect for different characters?" "How is Grant's character changing?" "What is revealed about Paul's character?" "What were two of the most important points brought up in this chapter?" and "How does the imagery in this chapter contribute to the tone?"

**Day 13- Is justice always just?** As we read chapter 18, we will do a "**Say Something**" activity where I will stop the students as they read, and they each have to make a comment with a sentence starter. They can choose from such stubs as: I don't understand, I noticed, I was reminded of, I think, I'm surprised that, If I were, I'd like to know, Although it seems, I realized, and I'm not sure. They will save this activity and finish it tomorrow. We will finish with a **journal** and class discussion; I will give the students three fictional cases of crimes or punishments. After each one, I will ask them to define the case as revenge or justice. Then, I will ask them to write how they decided for

each case. Essentially, I am asking, “Is there a difference between justice and revenge, and if so, what is it?”

**Day 14- Is justice always just? Four Corners:** The students will strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with questions revolving around justice and the legal system. I will make comments such as “The legal system sometimes views minorities unfairly,” “Rich people are less likely to be convicted of crimes than poor people,” and “The death penalty is a reasonable punishment.” Summarize chapter 19 and do **Say Something** with chapter 20.

**Day 15- Do we control the direction of our own lives or do forces outside of our control determine our destiny?**

**Journal:** Listing; the students will have two minutes to list every person, event, or place that has changed them in some way throughout their lives. After listing, they will have to circle one item on the list and write about how it has affected them. We will read chapter 21; because this is where Grant just begins to show signs of change, the students will answer the following **comprehension questions for a quiz grade:** “At this point in the novel, is Grant obligated or committed to helping Jefferson? Explain.” “What are some of Grant’s positive qualities, and what are his negative ones?” “Why do you think the author chose Grant, a teacher, to narrate this story instead of another character?” “Has Grant changed at all since the beginning of this story, and if so, how has he changed?”

**Day 16-** The students will **storyboard** chapter 23. Before reading, they will be told to look for times in the book that show an important element of Grant or Jefferson’s personality. They will have a mini-poster board and will split it into six squares. Today, they will do the first three. They will chronologically illustrate three important moments from the chapter. For the captions, not only do they have to write what is going on in the picture, but they have to explain what this moment reveals about the character’s development.

**Day 17-** The students will **storyboard** the last three squares of their poster based on their reading of chapter 24.

**Day 18- Obligation versus commitment: To whom are we obligated, and why?** I will open with the **discussion question** that the students have spoke about twice before; at this point in the novel, is Grant committed or obligated to helping Jefferson? We will read chapter 25 and 26. Most likely, my students will need time to finish storyboarding, so I am saving 15-20 minutes for them to put the final touches on their work.

**Day 19- Journal- What does it mean to be educated?** Are there different forms of education? Who is the most educated person you know? I will have made copies of chapter 27 (it’s pretty short) so the students can write on the copies. They will have two different colored highlighters- one for Grant and one for Reverend Ambrose. Every time there is evidence that Grant is more educated, they will **highlight that evidence in one color**, and the same for Reverend Ambrose. At the end of the reading, they will answer the question, “In your opinion, which character is more educated? Defend your answer with evidence.” Time permitting, we will do the **“On the Fence”** activity again where each side debates and has to convince the person or people who are undecided that their side is correct.

**Day 20- How does an author’s choice of elements contribute to theme and conflict?** Read chapter 28. I will give the students a **webquest** based on the author’s life. In pairs, the students will research Ernest J. Gaines’ upbringing, education, and history. Many of the questions at the end of the webquest will be higher order thinking questions asking them about the author’s motivation to write the novel, his motivation to choose certain characters and settings, and what they believe his desired results for the book were.

**Day 21-** Before we read chapter 29, Jefferson’s Diary, the students will have the guiding question written on the board: “Did Grant reach his goal of making Jefferson a man before his death?” Together, we will read the chapter. At the end, the students will answer the question on a sheet of paper. **We will have a line going across the room to represent a spectrum.** The students will stand all the way on one side if they feel Grant absolutely, 100% met his goal, and on the other if they feel he in no way even came close. Most of them will fall somewhere along the way. We will go down the line and each student will explain his or her opinion.

**Day 22- How does an author’s choice of elements contribute to theme and conflict?** We will read chapter 30 and make **theme statements and theme posters.** We will do guided practice by listing words on the board that the novel is about, such as responsibility, injustice, racism, pride, humanity, etc. From the list of words, the students will be asked, what is the author trying to say about this word? We will refine their theme statements, which they will put on posters. They will then have to illustrate this theme, either with a literal character or scene from the book or symbolically. They will have to write two examples from the novel that prove their theme. (Example: If I said that a theme in *Hamlet* was that acting before thinking can lead to tragedy, I would describe Hamlet’s blind stabbing of Polonius and the way it touched Ophelia and Laertes as one example).

*Day 23-* **Do we control the direction of our own lives or do forces outside of our control determine our destiny?** We will finish the novel. The students will have a **15-minute timed writing as a quiz grade** which asks, “How and why has Grant Wiggins changed from the beginning of the novel to the end?” They will then use the rest of the class period to finish their **theme posters**. If they do not finish in class, the poster is homework.

*Day 24-* **Do we control the direction of our own lives or do forces outside of our control determine our destiny?** I will introduce the performance assessment, which is the culminating activity for the novel. I will explain the assignment and answer questions, and the students will be placed into groups and given the case that they have to argue.

*Days 25-30:* The students will work on their projects in the computer lab for two days and in class for two days. They need to gather articles, write their speeches, work on a visual, and rehearse their presentations. On Day 29 and 30, the students will present.



## **Do we control the direction of our lives, or do forces outside of our control determine our destiny?**

Each one of you will be placed in a group of four. Each group will be assigned a certain position on the question asked above; you will either be arguing that it is free will- personal decisions and actions, or fate- forces outside of our control, that determine the outcome of our lives. Like Jefferson's lawyer, you may not agree with the side of the case that you have to argue, but you still have to do your best to be convincing. In your groups, you must come up with at least four examples that support your claim.

The four examples must come from the following:

- *A Lesson Before Dying*
- One non-fiction source (magazine, newspaper, online article, book, etc.)
- A previous work that we have read this year (*Hamlet*, *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, etc.)
- A real life example (personal, a family member, friend, etc.)

Your group will have to present to the entire class, and each person must speak. The speeches should be thorough and well-rehearsed; you may bring note cards. Your presentations will not be timed, but I imagine they will be between five and ten minutes.

Along with your speeches, your group must have a visual to present with. Remember, your goal is to persuade your audience that your opinion on fate or free-will is the right one. Your visual should be incorporated throughout your entire presentation. You can accompany your speeches in a variety of ways, such as

- A PowerPoint
- A scrapbook
- A poster
- A slideshow
- A website or Myspace pages for characters/people
- You may choose another medium, but please speak to me first

The purpose of each visual is to highlight the important points that go along with each example you discuss. Your visual cannot focus on solely one example but needs to incorporate all four. Your visual should accompany your speaking and engage the audience; do not simply present your visual as an afterthought. Remember that artwork/visuals can be literal or symbolic.

When we are finished with presentations, you will have another major grade assignment. We will be starting a persuasive writing unit, and you will be asked to write a persuasive paper defending your own opinion on this topic. Not only will you have to choose one side and defend your thoughts with examples, but you will also need to write about the implications for individuals and the world that your decision raises. You will be graded on the Northside writing rubric.

	Exceeds Standards (90-100)	Meets Standards (80-89)	Approaching Standards (70-79)	Below Standards (69 or less)
Requirements	The group has four or more examples of fate or free will from the assigned sources; every person in the group presents for a fair amount of time; the group uses their visual throughout their presentation to engage the audience and accompany their speaking	The group has four examples of fate or free will from the assigned sources; every person in the group presents (but the extent of their speaking may not be equal); the group presents a visual	The group has three examples of fate or free will from the assigned sources; most of the group members present; the group has a visual	The group has two examples of fate or free will from the assigned sources; some group members present; the group does not have a visual aspect to their presentation
Presentation Quality	The presenters are extremely organized; each presenter is loud and clear; the speakers engage the audience with hand motions, eye contact, and energy. Overall, the presentation is professional and well-rehearsed	The presenters are organized; most group members are audible and it is not difficult to understand their speaking; they use some hand motions and eye contact. Overall, the presentation has been taken seriously.	The presenters appear slightly unorganized; at least half of the group members were difficult to hear or were difficult to understand; they did not make eye contact, use hand motions, or attempt to engage the audience. Overall, the presentation could have been better	The presenters were unorganized; most people lacked clarity and were not audible; they did not make eye contact, use hand motions, or attempt to engage the audience. Overall, the audience could not focus on the message due to the quality of the presentation
Examples or Evidence	Four or more examples were drawn from the assigned sources to persuade the audience about fate or free will; each example was thoroughly explained, and the speaker connected the example to their topic. The examples chosen were not obvious; the examples were not only accurate, but provided an in-depth look at a character or circumstance.	Four examples were drawn from the assigned sources to persuade the audience about fate or free will; each example was explained, and the speaker connected the example to their topic. The examples chosen were all accurate, and some may have provided an in-depth look at a character or circumstance.	Three or four examples were drawn from the assigned sources to persuade the audience about fate or free will; the examples were somewhat explained; they were not well connected to the topic. The examples chosen were obvious but accurate.	Three or less examples were drawn from the assigned sources to persuade the audience about fate or free will; the examples were not explained well and were not connected to the group's topic. The examples were obvious and/or incorrect.
Visual	The visual is used throughout the presentation to enhance the speaker's message; the visual adds depth and detail to the information presented; all four examples are represented with the visual; overall, the visual is neat, conveys effort, and is creative.	The visual is used more than once throughout the presentation to support the speaker's message; all four examples are represented with the visual; overall, the visual is neat and conveys effort.	The visual is not used throughout the presentation but is presented once at the beginning or the end; the visual simply reiterates the information presented; three or less examples are represented with the visual; overall, the visual conveys some effort.	The visual is either not present or conveys little to no time or effort.
Teacher Comments:				
This rubric accounts for 80% of your major grade. The other 20% will come from a peer evaluation filled out by your group members. The other people in your group will anonymously grade you based on your attitude, knowledge of the material, participation, and effort.				

## Peer Evaluation

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Please fill out the table below for your group members as honestly as possible. All you need to do is write the amount of points (out of five) that they deserve in each area. In the last column, you will calculate how many points out of 20 you feel they should receive. They will not see your comments or the grades you chose.

	<b>Attitude (Worth 5 points)</b> Was this person polite? Easy to work with? Considerate of feelings? Positive?	<b>Knowledge of Material (Worth 5 points)</b> Was this person knowledgeable enough about the current novel, past works, and other examples to be an asset to the group?	<b>Participation (Worth 5 points)</b> Was this person in class every day? Did they work every day? Did they present? Did they help others if they were finished with their own work?	<b>Effort (Worth 5 points)</b> Did this person do their best? Did they contribute to group decisions? Did they do quality, "above and beyond" work?	<b>Total Points (Out of 20)</b>
Group Member:					
Group Member:					
Group Member:					
Group Member:					
<b>*** Please add comments and concerns on the back of this sheet. What do I need to consider when grading your group?</b>					